



A common thread

What started as just a skein of yarn became a bond that transcended cultural lines and language barriers for two families. To Dennis and Kristina Sacrey, it became a way to open a door, and to a refugee family from Burundi, Africa, it became a lifeline.

Refugee families from several conflict-torn African nations are being resettled in Northern Virginia. The “free cases,” those refugees coming to Virginia who have no relatives in the United States, are sent to Fredericksburg. By October, officials expected the number in Fredericksburg to be close to 200 men, women and children.

Fredericksburg Baptist Church is committed to be a place of welcome for these families and has established several opportunities for church members to assist them, including a conversational English program, childcare and meeting day-to-day needs.

“We have members from our church engaged in this every day,” said Jeanne Anderson, FBC’s minister with missions.

The Sacreys began to learn about some of the needs of the refugee families when Dennis, also a church administrator at FBC, noticed a common thread between some of the African women and his wife, Kristina.

“I discovered that many of the refugee women are knitters,” he said. “My wife is also a knitter, and she procures materials for them. We take them the supplies, and they knit together. That was our introduction to this part of the community, and from there we’ve formed strong relationships.”

As the women knitted side-by-side, Kristina began to better understand the kinds of needs the refugee families had. She and Dennis help in unexpected ways, like driving families to the grocery store so they won’t have to carry

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Above: Barbara Louthan (left) an ESL teacher and Fredericksburg Baptist Church member, shares a moment with ESL class member Fathia Ali.

Photos provided by FBC.

packages on city buses or even explaining how to use a dishwasher.

Dennis noticed that one family he frequently took to the grocery store often purchased cans of tuna. It took him by surprise, then, when after several weeks, the family held up a can opener and asked him what it was. After he demonstrated, he asked how they had been opening the tuna cans.

"They had been using a huge butcher knife to jam into the can and pry it open," Dennis said. "Another family had been using their stove as a vegetable bin. The local refugee center doesn't have the time or resources [due to the rapidly growing number of arrivals] to educate them in day-to-day things. So we try to make ourselves available, so they have someone they know to ask for help. It empowers them to know how to do things for themselves."

Anderson believes this is the most wonderful outcome of the program.

"Our members are so involved in really getting to know these new neighbors. They want to understand their needs," she said. "Parents are helping parents, like explaining what a report card means. It fosters relationships."

For the Sacreys, the relationship is everything.

"It wasn't something that either of us was looking for," said Dennis. "But something as simple as sharing a skein of yarn and knitting needles led to something so wonderful and amazing."

While refugee resettlement is a new effort for FBC, community ministry is not. In fact, "a people on mission" is part of the 2,000-member church's motto.

"For people who don't want to sit still in their faith, this is a great place to be," said Anderson.

One of the church's longest-running ministries is Special Friends, which started in 1979. Because caring for their developmentally disabled children often prevented parents from participating in worship, the church began training volunteers to care for children with special needs. From there the ministry grew to include bringing the gospel message to developmentally disabled adults. Now, more than 40 mentally challenged adults attend

worship services, enjoy fellowship activities and minister alongside other members of FBC every week. There is also a Special Friends Bible Study, although some mentally challenged adults choose to join other study groups.

"I have one (challenged) young woman in the Companions in Christ class I lead," said Anderson. "And I can tell you, she is the only one who does her homework regularly. She's a joy."

Out of the Special Friends ministry, the church developed two residential group homes for mentally challenged adults whose families could no longer care for them. Although it is not a requirement, many of the residents are members of FBC, and many church members volunteer at the homes, which are owned by FBC and operated through a partnership with the Virginia Baptist Children's Home and Family Services.

That kind of partnership is key to community ministry in a church, according to Anderson. "The only way that things are sustainable," she said, "is if you work in partnership with others."

FBC has found willing partners in other Fredericksburg churches and organizations for their weekly community dinner. For five years, FBC has offered a meal every

Thursday night. The ministry began as a way to reach out to the homeless and hungry. Spaghetti, salad, bread, dessert and a beverage are provided free. As many as 300 to 400 people attend the dinners.

In addition to volunteers from FBC, scouting groups, sports teams, college groups, older adults and groups from other local churches volunteer to prepare and serve the meals, or simply to enjoy being together.

"An important part of the ministry is table fellowship," said Anderson.

In that collaborative spirit, FBC has partnered with other Fredericksburg churches that want to host community dinners. "Many times, our church steps out in a leadership way," said Anderson. "We want to be a model for other churches. So we help other local churches to replicate our community meal. Our dream is that there would be a free,

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Doylene Wilkes (second from left), an ESL teacher and member of FBC, enjoys an outdoor fellowship with members of her ESL class.

community meal in a different Fredericksburg church every night of the week. And we're almost there!"

FBC also helps churches replicate its "Newcomer Blitz Welcome" for refugee families. Packets of information were sent to other area churches during the summer describing FBC's model of helping one Burundian refugee family set up housekeeping. It's a model that worked so well for FBC, they couldn't wait to share it, Anderson said.

The model began with the Sunday message from Pastor Larry Haun. He highlighted Luke 12: 13 – 21 (Jesus' parable of the rich man building bigger barns to keep all that he had accumulated). Then he asked those in attendance to consider that instead of building bigger barns, they might need bigger hearts for God and their neighbors. They were asked to contribute new or used items to a specific family of eight (mother, father, and six girls from infancy to 12 years of age) that was fleeing persecution in Africa.

After the two morning services, said Anderson, only 10 items on a six-page list remained. By the following Tuesday, every need was filled and duplicate items were being accepted for the next family.

"It begins with scripture," Anderson said. "Our pastor is a good storyteller. He gives us the 'this is what it means to you.' And then we make a request for what is needed."

This way everyone, from longtime members to the person attending for the first time, has an opportunity to participate.

"What a blessing it is to be welcomed and to be welcoming," she said. "We bring possibilities for interaction into our ministries. It's not just a program, it's an interaction."

Meaningful relationships are what people are seeking, Haun said.

"In today's world, people are looking for meaningful experiences that are connected to scripture." He cites the example of a youth group's recent activity.

"If he [the youth minister] arranged for the youth to go to a Baltimore Orioles baseball game, he might get 25 kids to sign up. But if he arranged a time to go do landscaping and yard work at the home of a refugee, 75 to 100 kids would show up. They want to do something meaningful that really connects to their faith story."

Haun's own involvement also informs his message. "I am involved in the missions, and so it becomes a natural part of how I interpret scripture, to tell the stories of what our ministries are and are becoming," he said.

As a congregation, FBC recognizes that its mission is ever-changing.

"Our gifts as a congregation change, and the needs of our community change," Haun said. "So you've got to talk about it. We could go back to

the old way of collecting our money and sending it away to missions in foreign countries, and saying how much we care. But that's not what we want."

What FBC wants is to be involved and it wants to build relationships.

"It is our community. The need is before us all of the time. It's here. It's us," Anderson said. "If you have your eyes open and heart ready, you see it. And that's sustainability."

And the benefits flow both ways.

"Our ministries are so nourishing to the people who participate, who do the helping," she said. "It

creates in you this humility and gratitude. Not just, 'God, thank you for what I have,' but, 'God, thank you for allowing me to be who I am so I can do this work for you.' It's humbling."



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About Forgiveness

**It's offered freely, and we need only
Unclench our tight fists and
Open our hands and hearts wide
To receive the healing
Of our brokenness and old scars.**

**True compassion, peace, and deep joy
Await the recipient of the divine gift
That only Spirit bestows.
Yet Spirit gives only what it receives –
Forgiveness begets only itself.**

**Gateway to hope, and most
Sacred key to the Holy of Holies,
Forgiveness redeems our weary souls,
Absolves our painful guilt, and
Reveals fear's illusory source.**

**Humility, gratitude and love are genuine
Only in forgiveness' light.
Whatever is granted another
Is granted to oneself and God.
Truly forgive another, and all are forgiven.**

**As the bridge to God's spiritual kingdom,
Forgiveness liberates us from a world
Of madness and struggle created by
Anger, pride and blame.
It allows us to be who we are – Now.**

**Forgive
And be free
To love.**

– Skip Londos